

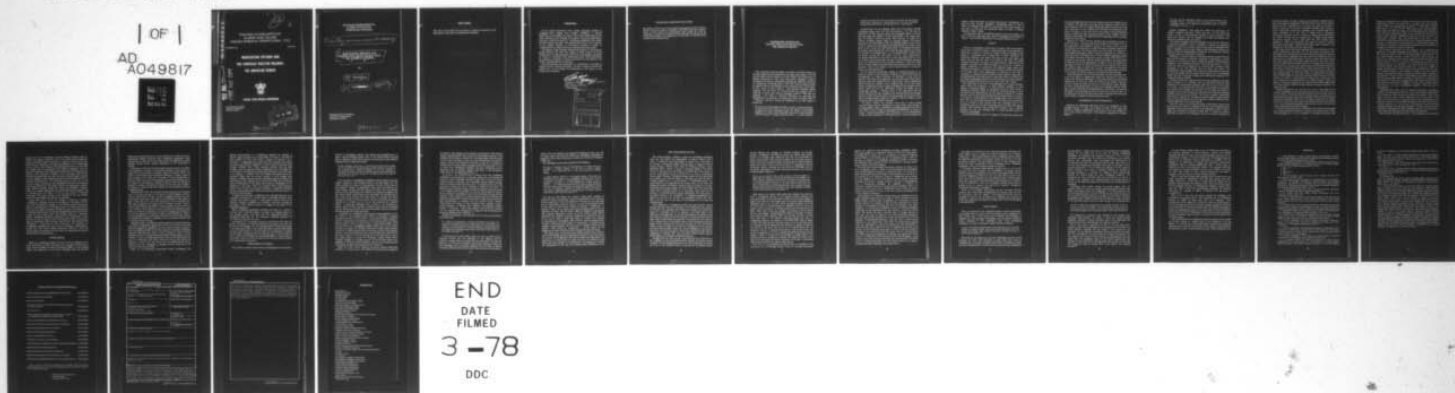
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WARFIGHTING OPTIONS AND THE STRATEGIC NUCLEAR BALANCE: THE AMER--ETC(U)  
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**WARFIGHTING OPTIONS AND  
THE STRATEGIC NUCLEAR BALANCE:  
THE AMERICAN DEBATE**



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⑥ **WARFIGHTING OPTIONS AND  
THE STRATEGIC NUCLEAR BALANCE:  
THE AMERICAN DEBATE,**

by

⑩ John F. Scott

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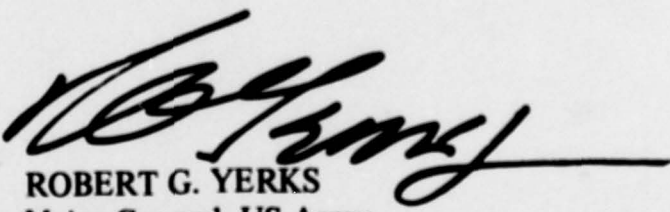



## FOREWORD

Of the several deterrence force models reasonably familiar to strategists—those ranging from massive retaliation, to assured destruction, to disarming first strike—only those models based on the policy assumption that strategic forces have a role in deterring theater wars give a logical foundation for warfighting capabilities as the author describes them in this paper. This memorandum centers on the capacity to use strategic weapons of counterforce accuracy in strikes or retaliations that are clearly less than a disarming first strike attack.

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This memorandum was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

  
ROBERT G. YERKS  
Major General, US Army  
Commanding

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

MR. JOHN F. SCOTT came to the Strategic Studies Institute in 1963. He holds a bachelor's degree in commerce and finance from Wilkes College and a master's degree in social science from Shippensburg State College. Mr. Scott has contributed to several Army studies on nuclear deterrence and strategy. He has written several articles on the application of social science to national security problems in professional journals.

### **WARFIGHTING OPTIONS AND THE STRATEGIC NUCLEAR BALANCE: THE AMERICAN DEBATE**

The continuing American debate over what we should do about our strategic nuclear forces intensified so markedly since January 1974 that we can rightly call the results *the* current debate. The US Secretary of Defense announced at that time<sup>1</sup> that greater flexibility would be introduced into nuclear employment planning. He called the innovation an "adjustment in strategic policy."<sup>2</sup> We were to have a greater number of options—ways to use strategic nuclear weapons in war. "In the past," he said, "most of [our] options . . . have involved relatively massive responses."<sup>3</sup> In the future we would provide the president with "a wider set of much more selective targeting options."<sup>4</sup> With this new capability, "we hope to reinforce deterrence by removing the temptation for an adversary to consider any kind of nuclear attack."<sup>5</sup>

Although deterrence should be improved, if, for any reason, it should fail:

We want to have the planning flexibility to be able to respond selectively to the attack in such a way as to (1) limit the chances of uncontrolled escalation, and (2) hit meaningful targets with sufficient accuracy-yield combination to destroy only the intended target and to avoid widespread collateral damage. If a nuclear clash should occur . . . in order to protect



American cities and the cities of our allies, we shall rely into the wartime period upon reserving our 'assured destruction' force and persuading, through intrawar deterrence, any potential foe not to attack cities.<sup>6</sup>

Commentators on the adjusted policy drove the debate through overlapping phases since the 1974 announcement. The first may be called the "so what" phase in which some strategists failed to see that anything really had changed: we had long planned to hit targets other than an attacker's cities and surely, they believed, we could do so without launching massive volleys of strategic weapons. The second phase grew from the inference that the adjusted policy was more than at first it seemed; it could, rather than bolster deterrence, make it more likely to fail—an issue we shall discuss below. In this phase, the debate grew bitter and unproductive, with opposing sides using moral outrage to underline their disagreement.<sup>7</sup> It was reprehensible to target cities and people, as with the "old" policy—as if the "new" policy did not too depend ultimately on the threat to cities and people, which it does. In the latest and current phase, the issue of limited strategic options is alive, but overshadowed by the broader questions of where the USSR and the United States are headed with their strategic nuclear forces and doctrines: what is the "balance," what would it come to, would it be better or worse than before?

In the sometimes hyperbolic writing on national security we are always, it seems, on the threshold of disaster or renewal; therefore, the consequences of today's decisions are profound. It may well be, however, that what was exaggeration is at last sober truth: that today's decisions have less margin for error than before. Their consequences will be profound, whatever those decisions may be, for the United States no longer has a great margin of strategic forces strength over the Soviet Union. We are not measurably weaker, but neither are we measurably stronger. A decision made on the assumption that the Soviets will level off their strategic forces developments means a higher risk for us than in the past when, if our assumption was wrong, we were still far enough ahead to right the "balance." This is, I believe, a crude but honest way to describe the problem.

The larger debate over strategic forces has so many soaring excursions into virtuoso calculation, so many finely tuned themes of exacting dialectic, that to summarize competing arguments is to flatten their effect. As we would not summarize *The Merchant of Venice* by saying "it's about some fellow who lends money," we are obliged either to give a full accounting or to find some way to focus on an issue that

tends to reflect the debate as a whole. I have chosen "warfighting," as a label for some strategic capabilities. Warfighting issues do tend to reflect the strategic and political components of the larger debate. In this way, we can bring the arguments within the pale of ordinary mortals—a "little" debate.

To discuss the idea of warfighting strategic forces and strategy, it is best to have the perspective that comes from grappling with the idea of "parity," and from the classification of strategic deterrence forces.

### PARITY

This is a troublesome concept but one that is part of the debate. From one's own point of view, it could be said that we had superiority, inferiority, or parity in relation to another country's strategic forces. Parity is a convenient way to label what is neither superiority nor inferiority (whatever *they* mean). The lover of the word parity can claim, after all, that his word is as useful as the other two unless someone pulls from a hat some very solid criteria to make sense of the tangible, countable facts. When doubters say "prove it" to claims of parity, superiority, or inferiority, the argument might begin with recitations of numbers of weapons, their diversity of kind, their quality, and the like. But it soon degenerates or graduates, as you will, to "scenarios" in which one side or neither is given credit for being able to do something the other side does not want done. Often, we will see that the claims of advantage made for one side have less to do with numbers, kind, and quality than they have to do with "will" and "resolve."

We might find at the end of this squabble that, to some debaters, parity means the acceptance of equal military capability to cause damage to physical things, an acceptance which to them means a withering of will and resolve on the part of the United States. It is on the part of the United States, say the debaters, because it is widely believed that we were ahead and allowed the Soviet Union to catch up if not pass us. These debaters see the strategic balance not as a balance sheet, but as a profit and loss statement.<sup>8</sup> To them, it is less important how we compare at this moment than how profitable each of the competitors was over the last accounting period. To abuse this analogy further, wise investors will go with the competitor who is making progress, not the one standing still. A rough *physical* parity is, therefore, meaningless.

*Psychological* parity is then, we suggest, the belief that neither side



has an advantage in how it can use the latent power of its military force to influence the will power not only of the competitor nation, but of third parties as well. If a debater holds the rather common view that one's opponent is more ruthless and otherwise less restrained in his choice of means to ends than one's own country, then psychological parity is hardly the same as physical parity. Given roughly the same physical wherewithal, the opponent has an advantage and the strategic situation is not at parity.

Meeting the twain between physical and psychological parity is *functional* parity—what each side has in relation to what each has it for. Deterring direct and deliberate attack on the home country—central war between the superpowers—is the first order of business. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union now has either the physical or psychological advantage to allow a claim of superiority in central war. Using the threat of strategic forces to deter military aggression against one's allies—extended deterrence—is more at issue in the debate. It is because we are at parity with the Soviet Union that it is at issue. When we believed we had an advantage in strategic forces, the capstone of deterring an attack on Western Europe was our strategic forces. If all else failed to stop an attack and to stop a war against our European friends, US strategic nuclear forces were the ominous presence hovering over a theater war. Parity means we no longer have this advantage.

This is the gloomy view of functional parity. If there is another view, it is not so much in disagreement about the conclusion as about its timing. The functional advantage of US strategic forces more probably disappeared 10 years ago when the Soviets could destroy American cities in central war about as well as we could destroy theirs. Besides, the status of functional parity is much more complex and more subtle than a simple deduction from physical parity would have it. Functional advantage is not something we had one year only to lose the next. As we shall see in the next section, most types of strategic deterrents have either explicit or implied extended deterrence roles.

## DETERRENCE AND DETERRENTS

Schemes for classifying deterrents tend to be designed, as they probably should, to serve the purpose at hand. In this essay, the deterrent's threat is emphasized—in the sense of how one could put it into words, briefly, if forced to. This scheme is suggested by Thomas Milburn:

The basic deterrent paradigm consists of some approximation of the statement, Do or . . . stop doing or do not do some act, or, with some probability (which is to be inferred by the deterred party), we shall do something to or for you . . .<sup>9</sup>

*Massive Retaliation.* Now passe but useful for perspective, the massive retaliation deterrence threat says that, "If you attack my country or any of my important interests in other countries, I will strike your country with my missiles and bombs and destroy your means for retaliation and your society."

The massive retaliation deterrent should be—but was not—based on a counterforce capability: this is a capability to destroy an opponent's missiles and aircraft so that he could not use them in retaliation. With such a capability and by other means to limit damage to himself, the deterrer should be invulnerable to retaliation. As we shall see, it sounds much the same as a "first strike" deterrent.

*Minimum, or Finite, Deterrent.* This deterrent gets its label from the idea that the deterrer's needs are calculated to correspond to a finite number of an opponent's cities it would be capable of destroying in retaliation to an opponent's attack.<sup>10</sup> The deterrent threat is, "If you attack me with your strategic forces, I will use what I expect to have remaining of my own strategic forces to strike your cities." The presumption is that enough of the opponent's cities could be destroyed to make him believe that an attack on the deterrer is not worthwhile. Notice that the threat says nothing about striking the opponent if he attacks the deterrer's allies.

*Assured Destruction.* This deterrent is the most difficult to describe. This is because it is a hybrid—a sort of super-finite deterrent with intimations of counterforce potential. That is to say, if we try to relate it to reality, to something that does exist or has existed, it is a hybrid. As a pure model, however, it says this: "If you attack me with your strategic forces, I will certainly in turn strike your cities and industrial facilities and destroy your society." The word "certainly" implies that destruction is assured by the deterrer having clearly enough striking power to last through the worst the opponent could do with his attack, with enough left to carry out the threat.

Now, the reason it is a hybrid in reality is that when a deterrer has the numbers and variety of retaliatory forces to assure himself and his opponent that he can survive the worst the opponent can do, he can be suspected of having the capacity to strike first. If, moreover, at least a noticeable portion of his retaliatory forces are accurate enough and

powerful enough to be able to destroy the opponent's missiles in their silos, the suspicion is heightened. Both the Soviet Union and the United States have the combinations of accuracy and power to be able to destroy a large part of the other's land-based missiles. Both, therefore, seem to have some counterforce capability, even if neither might have much confidence in it and even if neither has an announced counterforce doctrine—that is, a policy of striking first. Nevertheless, the relation between the two superpowers is called mutual assured destruction because neither could strike the other without great penalties to itself from retaliation. But what the *model* of assured destruction says is that, "I will not be the first to strike—however, I will strike back." The reality does not confirm this.

Both sides have been firmly equivocal about the functions of their assured destruction deterrents. On the one hand, the Soviets only reluctantly acknowledge levels of war<sup>11</sup> and have long tried to reinforce their deterrent by suggestions that any serious war would be total—no holds barred. It makes little sense for them to imply this threat unless the hearer infers that the Soviets might choose to strike first. If the forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact were to engage in war in Europe, and if this were a serious war which threatens the political interests of the Soviets, as they see those interests, then it is as good as "total," and if it is total, we have no reason to believe that they would not launch a first strategic strike. On the other hand, the United States has joined with its NATO allies in a deterrence strategy which has as one of its key features the threat to bring strategic nuclear forces to bear on a war that threatened the independence of a NATO country. Either this feature of strategy implies that the United States/NATO might strike the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe first with strategic weapons, or it makes no sense.

Assured destruction, we can now see, is not a bad label for the current relationship of US and Soviet deterrents to central war. But in its pure form, as a model, assured destruction does not help much to understand how each would use its strategic forces to protect interests beyond its homeland. This is not to say that an imperative of strategic deterrents is that they must have an extended deterrence role. Rather, it is to say that both superpowers have chosen such a role for their assured destruction deterrents in reality.

*Flexible Assured Destruction.* This label is for a deterrent that makes the extended deterrent function of assured destruction forces explicit. The flexibility in it is not confined to extended deterrence only,



however, but applies also to central war deterrence. The threat is this: "Depending on how you attack me or my allies with your strategic forces or with your general purpose forces,<sup>12</sup> I will, when I choose, strike back at you, as I choose." Both sides in the American debate might object, for different reasons, to this description, but I believe it to be an honest description. First, let us concede that this deterrent requires some strategic capabilities with the accuracy and power of counterforce weapons. But this requirement is far from a true counterforce potential, and that is the rub: it could be designed to have a large or a small portion of its resources in counterforce weapons. If too much or too little, it would fall into another deterrent class and its meaning for deterrence would be different.

The deterrent statement must be analyzed a bit to illustrate the difficulties of squaring capabilities with strategy. It seems to be saying this, from the point of view of the United States as the deterrer: "If you attack Western Europe, I could if I choose, when I choose, use some of my strategic forces to strike targets in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe." This is a threat not to retaliate to an attack on the United States, but to "retaliate" to an attack on Western Europe—on European NATO. And the threat also says: "If you, by accident or design, should launch a limited attack on the United States—say a few to a hundred missiles—I will retaliate, perhaps with a like number, perhaps with greater numbers, perhaps on military targets, perhaps on other targets." In other words, the flexibility in this assured destruction deterrent presumably allows a number of initiatives or retaliations as the situation of war seems to suggest. When the counterforce portion of this deterrent is *less* than a capability to disarm the opponent with a first strike, I call this a warfighting capability. This idea will be discussed later.

*Disarming First Strike.* This is a deterrent with great counterforce capacity. Its deterrent statement is: "I can, when I choose—especially if you provoke me—strike at you and destroy your ability to hurt me in return, and leave your society—what's left of it—at my mercy." The fillip, "if you provoke me," gives the flavor of the political power this deterrent confers to the side that has it if he is the only one that has it. If both sides have it, it is the worst of all deterrent worlds, the most unstable, because each has great incentive to be the one to act first. If both have a *disarming* first strike capability, only the one who is first to strike will do the disarming; the other will be the disarmed.

*War Winning.* This deterrent says: "I can engage you in any kind of

nuclear war to the exhaustion of your strategic weapons—many of which I can destroy—and come out of it in much better shape as a nation and society than you; moreover, I expect to come out of it with losses that are tolerable to me given the benefit to me of eliminating you as a threat.” In contrast to the disarming first strike deterrent, this one speaks with the confidence that means its possessor need not disarm his opponent with a first strike provided that he destroys a large portion of his opponent’s retaliatory force. His losses will then be tolerable. Broadly, there are only four ways to limit damage to oneself once war begins: by destroying the opponent’s weapons before they are launched (counterforce); by destroying them on the way to their intended targets (antiaircraft and antimissile defenses); by protecting people and things from the deadly effects of an opponent’s weapons (civil defense programs; shelters for people and retaliatory weapons; hiding—for example, submarines that cannot be located as targets); and, by stopping the war before it runs its full course of potential destruction. The latter method is not assumed in the war winning policy, but, presumably, the others are so assumed.

Notice that none of the five classes of deterrent is labeled “warfighting,” although that idea is the subject of this essay. We have seen that warfighting is implied in the flexible assured destruction model, it dominates the war winning model, it is irrelevant in the first strike and the massive retaliation models, and lurks in the background of the assured destruction model. But warfighting should not be used as a label for the overall posture and strategic policy of a deterrent. Rather, warfighting should be understood as an ingredient of some deterrent forces. It is not the cake—it is the pinch of salt, or the cups of sugar, as appropriate. When someone says that you must choose *either* warfighting *or* deterrence—as both proponents and opponents of warfighting capabilities have said—they are playing a semantic game. People who call mutual assured destruction MAD, to evoke the psychoneurotic connotations of that word, are milking the acronym in the same kind of semantic game.

### WARFIGHTING

What is a warfighting capable deterrent? How is it different from other deterrents? A victim of nuclear war is equally as dead from a finite deterrent ICBM, an assured destruction ICBM, or a war winning ICBM. The distinction is not there. Although there are physical



differences among deterrents, it is more instructive to look first at the assumptions behind deterrents with warfighting capabilities. These assumptions are inferred from the debate about warfighting and limited strategic options because explicit assumptions are not necessarily in fashion.

Assumption I: War with strategic nuclear weapons can be controlled. This assumption is based on a precedent assumption that nuclear war might not be an exchange of massive volleys of weapons. Rather, the actions of both sides can be restrained. Although a "spasm" attack of great numbers is not ruled out as possible, it is also possible that an attacker might use some of his strategic weapons and withhold some. He might act circumspectly, perhaps trying to limit the damage to himself by setting an example of restraint for the other side to follow; he might try to win his war with superior nerve and superior ability at manipulating risk.

Assumption II: War with strategic nuclear weapons can be stopped short of extensive damage to the society of either belligerent. Wars in modern history have not been of the Carthaginian variety; they have been ended while both sides still had something left with which to fight. Could this be the case with nuclear war? It is conceivable. One side might capitulate. One might choose "strategic surrender" while it still has much fighting strength left, thereby gaining a voice in the terms of the armistice. Both sides could reject the winner-loser distinction and agree to terminate the fighting to avoid more damage. This assumption is no less an assumption because it could be a self-fulfilling one. That is, for the assumption to be plausible, both sides must have some measure of warfighting capabilities—capabilities for the restrained, limited uses of strategic nuclear weapons.

Assumption III: A warfighting capable deterrent is the best deterrent to another's warfighting capable force. If this is true, then if one side develops warfighting capabilities, the other must, or should, as well. To face a warfighting capable force with a deterrent that lacks warfighting potential might leave the deterrer with a decision in crises to protect threatened interests by launching unrestrained strategic attacks or to do nothing. To face a warfighting deterrent with an overriding deterrent, such as a disarming first strike, does the job but also invites the opponent to match your first strike force by building up his own as quickly as he can, bringing on a situation we have described as the worst of all deterrence worlds.

These are the important assumptions behind warfighting. The

physical characteristics of a warfighting capability are difficult to describe clearly because, as we noted earlier, too much or too little of them pushes the force into another category of deterrent. At a minimum, a warfighting force must have the command and control procedures and physical capabilities to launch measured portions of the strategic offensive force. These measured portions must be small enough so that the opponent cannot misinterpret one in its flight and on its impact as a full-blown strategic strike intended to ruin his society or his capacity to retaliate. Next, the missiles and bombs used in the measured strikes must be accurate enough to avoid causing great damage to civilians and their towns, while destroying such military and civil targets as, say, airfields, dams, and the like. This, as we can see, is simply restating part of the quote from Secretary Schlesinger at the beginning of this essay. Then, the weapons used in these measured attacks must be able to penetrate antimissile or anti-aircraft defenses, because overwhelming these defenses with great numbers is contrary to the idea of limited strikes.

It might be argued that a warfighting force must also have protective measures in the deterrer's country such as antimissile defenses and a working civil defense system. I would assert, however, that if the minimum offensive capabilities are available, a deterrent is capable of warfighting. This assertion should be judged in the light of the following paragraphs.

When warfighting capabilities constitute the bulk of a deterrer's strategic force, it should properly be called a war winning posture. A war winning policy may share the four assumptions given for warfighting—depending on the possessor's political objectives in war—but it also has one of its own.

Assumption IV: A strategic nuclear war can be won. Not only the deterrer can believe, but also his opponent can believe, that a war can be won by the possessor of a war winning posture. If either side is seen to be taking great pains to arm itself with many weapons of silo-killing accuracy, *and* measures to protect itself from its opponent's weapons by antimissile, anti-aircraft and civil defenses, then it can be inferred that it might be developing a war winning capability. It is preparing not necessarily to start a war but to come out of a war, if it occurs, in much better shape than its opponent.

#### SOME POINTS OF DEBATE

The earliest of reasons US Government officials gave for the need for

limited or warfighting options were simple and straightforward: to deter a limited strategic nuclear strike at the United States by being able to respond in kind. Often quoted in the literature of the debate is President Nixon's statement in 1970:

Should a President, in the event of a nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of the certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans? Should the concept of assured destruction be narrowly defined and should it be the only measure of our ability to deter the variety of threats we may face?<sup>13</sup>

Even the critics of warfighting capabilities would probably agree that massive response to very limited attacks is not the thing to do. But critics question two points of this argument. The first is that they see the assumed "scenario" as implausible. Under what circumstances, for what reasons, would potential opponents launch this very limited attack on the United States to be faced in turn with the possibility that the United States would indeed react vigorously? The second point is that, even if the scenario ever came about, we already have (they assume) the kinds of precise weapons and the command and control procedures to retaliate tit for tat, so why announce an "adjusted policy" as Secretary Schlesinger did in 1974, to do something we already could do? Why announce it indeed? There must be something more to this change in policy than deterring limited central war attacks, and this is where the debate gets lively.

A capability for warfighting can be argued as being essential *if* we see the threat to use strategic nuclear forces as necessary to support extended deterrence. If the deterrer, such as NATO, does not believe it has the conventional forces strength to withstand an attack on Western Europe without resort to other means, it must develop either a first strike deterrent or a warfighting capable nuclear force. As the NATO strategy now stands, the Alliance's deterrent to major attack includes the threat to bring strategic nuclear forces into the war if less dramatic defenses—such as tactical nuclear and conventional forces—fail. This has long been a feature of NATO strategy and it has long been the role of the United States to provide the "strategic" options. When NATO officially changed its strategic concept in 1967-68 and placed more emphasis on the less dramatic defenses, it did not in the process remove the strategic nuclear forces element from its deterrent.

When the Soviet Union achieved its mutual assured destruction capability in strategic forces, the US/NATO strategy did not change in



its need for the strategic forces element of deterrence. That element simply made less sense. How could the United States threaten to use strategic nuclear forces in behalf of its European allies when the object of that threat could give as good as it got? This situation amounts to a disparity between our declaratory deterrence policy for the defense of Europe and our actual military strategy should deterrence fail, if we do not have some warfighting capability. Secretary Schlesinger's policy adjustment was an attempt, suggests Paul Nitze, to get declaratory policy closer to a credible action policy.<sup>14</sup>

If, however, the US/NATO has a strategic force with warfighting capabilities, the introduction of strategic weapons into a European war becomes a more believable deterrent threat than a threat to launch massive attacks. It becomes more believable because limited strategic strikes are actions which leave the choice of suicidal central war to the opponent, a choice he may be reluctant to make for the "prize" of Western Europe. Nuclear strikes on selected targets in the Soviet Union or on military forces and facilities to the rear of the battle in Eastern Europe would not necessarily stop an attack on Western Europe already underway. And, compared to a strong conventional forces defense, the strategic options threat would be less stable in crises and less believable than conventional, or perhaps even the tactical nuclear, defense. "Nevertheless, the threat of such retaliation must certainly provide a strong deterrent to Warsaw Pact planners contemplating massive strikes."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, "such threats against East European countries may also diminish their willingness to cooperate with the Soviets, thus weakening [Warsaw Pact] solidarity."<sup>16</sup>

Against this thinking is the argument that we cannot prove that the threat will work.

If a strategy of threatening or actually conducting such attacks is to succeed in controlling the terror of nuclear war, then it must induce the opponent to accept some political accommodation: the United States must recognize that the question as to whether reasonable accommodation can be brought about by limited nuclear attack or the threat of it is a matter of the greatest uncertainty.<sup>17</sup>

To succeed as an action policy, then, as a way to control and to terminate nuclear war, the resolution of the fighting must be political—a choice taken by people with the authority to say stop the fighting now. If the war continues, and, perhaps, escalates to wider and more damaging uses of strategic weapons, then the value of limited warfighting options will have been little. But is that the critical point of

debate? Does the objection not assume by implication that a war will be fought rather than deterred? Should not warfighting capabilities be judged on both counts, deterrence as well as the control of escalation within war?

Mr. Schlesinger attacks such questions in this fashion:

The heart of deterrence lies in the development of strategies and forces providing a credible response in the event of direct military assault. . . . For, if deterrence were to fail, there would be no effective counter.

A credible military response as the essential element of deterrence has sometimes been referred to as a warfighting capability. This term has unfortunately lent itself to misunderstanding. The objective of such a capability is to deter—i.e., to avoid warfighting by making deterrence effective. . . . The underlying point, however, is that the sharp distinction frequently drawn between deterrent and warfighting capabilities is a bogus one. Yet, this semantic confusion has been the source repeatedly of obfuscation in public discussion. It is the capacity to threaten a credible response that makes deterrence effective.<sup>18</sup>

We have in this debate the common “ping pong” problem in deterrence theory and practice. First, the believability of the deterrer’s threat is assumed to lower the likelihood of attack, yet this same high level of believability leads the attacker to expect the threatened action if and when he does attack, whether his attack is “deliberate” or whether it grew out of tension and crisis, preceding which he had no intention to attack. The first effect might be managed by threatening only moderate responses to attack, as a first reaction, which tells an opponent that, whether his attack is deliberate or inadvertent, the war is not out of hand at such high levels of violence that political accommodation is meaningless. Thus, NATO’s current strategic feature of direct defense has this quality of moderation, of meeting attack initially at approximately the same level of violence chosen by the attacker. There would be, presumably, a second chance for the belligerents to call it off before either escalated the risks and stakes.

The second part of the ping pong problem derives from the first: that by threatening moderate responses, the deterrer lowers the costs to the attacker for his aggression and thereby might encourage attack. The dilemma is, of course, that you cannot have one—the moderate threat which has some promise of controlling and terminating war—without the consequences of the other—the possibly greater likelihood of war.



## THE LIKELIHOOD OF WAR

The crucial question, I believe, is this: Do warfighting capabilities make war more likely? The believability of military threats is not a matter of absolutes; their believability is relative, one to the other of the choices. A threatened limited strategic strike on targets in Eastern Europe during a Warsaw Pact attack on Western Europe is more believable than a threat to launch a thousand ICBM at the Soviet Union. At the same time, this threat is less believable than a threat to use the conventional forces of NATO to try to stop a conventional forces attack. However, if limited strategic strikes are more believable than massive ones, does the threat to use them not raise the risk of strategic nuclear war if a "conventional" or "battlefield nuclear" war comes about? Let us stipulate for the moment that, to the extent the belligerents believe the limited strategic strikes are likely to be used, this means that strategic nuclear war is more likely. But, does it not also follow that if strategic nuclear war is too high a price to pay for the privilege of attacking Western Europe deliberately, then that attack is *less* likely because of the availability of warfighting capabilities? It is difficult to see how you can have one assumption without the other. There must be more to the issue of the likelihood of war than this offsetting logic.

First, opponents of warfighting options can argue that the options degrade extended deterrence because, if the destruction they cause is by definition not crippling either militarily or socially, that destruction might be a tolerable cost to an opponent with high stakes in the objectives of his aggression. To counter this argument, proponents must reply that it is not the destruction caused by the limited nuclear actions alone which would induce the opponent to terminate the war; rather, it is the implied threat in the limited actions that something worse could happen to the opponent if he does not stop the war now. The limited nuclear action is a signal of the deterrer's willingness to take the risks associated with strategic nuclear war, and his willingness to take greater risks if the war is not stopped. It follows that having the policy and the capabilities to threaten and carry out these limited nuclear options should improve, not degrade, extended deterrence.

All right, then, the critic can ask—does deterrence not come down to the credibility of the post-limited-nuclear options, the further actions "implied" in the initial limited nuclear acts? Are these follow-on threats any more or less credible if they are preceded by the limited nuclear

actions? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Perhaps breaking the strategic weapons "threshold" with limited options does indeed make greater threats more credible than otherwise. But that, the proponents can argue, is not the issue. The real issue is whether we want some means to control the level of escalation below the destruction of urban-industrial targets and at least to try to end the war short of launching our assured destruction strikes. Although the then Secretary Schlesinger was not necessarily addressing an extended deterrence situation, his comment on this problem is pertinent:

We can give no assurance that a small exchange would not escalate to a higher level. We simply are stating that because there is a possibility of a small exchange escalating to the top, there is no reason why we must make it a certainty by going all the way to the top ourselves. Just because you reach that pessimistic conclusion at the outset does not mean that you must go and bash up the urban industrial base of your opponent, knowing full well that he will do the same thing to you. That is making a certainty of what would otherwise be an uncertainty.<sup>19</sup>

Both sides of the debate might agree that whether they liked the idea of warfighting options or not, limited strategic options once executed do leave us uncertain about whether the war would escalate to higher levels. But the critics might argue that simply having warfighting capabilities allows us to get into these uncertain situations. If we did not have them, we should instead be compelled to look to other, less drastic means to protect our foreign interests and the interests of our allies. These other means are stronger conventional forces in NATO Europe, and perhaps, strengthening the deterrent functions of theater and tactical nuclear weapons. With this thought, however, we have come full circle to the political reasoning behind the need for warfighting options in the defense of the NATO allies. This is a debate in itself. We shall say here only that, parity or not in strategic forces, our European friends believe the best deterrent to attack on them by the Soviets is the same kind as we in the United States have for ourselves—a threat to respond with strikes on the Soviet Union, the source of aggression. In a word, to square the political strategy, it is not simply a matter of having the local strength to repulse attack *or* the strategic options to punish for an attack. The allies want both to be a part of the deterrent, the latter a necessity, the former a compromise with American preferences, among other reasons.

Yet, even if, hypothetically, we did not have the problem of the functional role of strategic nuclear forces in extended deterrence,



suppose the opponent had warfighting strategic capabilities which, when used against us, by definition started a central war. What then is the likelihood of central war as a consequence of having warfighting options? Much of this debate can be cut through quickly to arrive at the issue of whether our warfighting capabilities increase or decrease the likelihood that the Soviet Union would launch a strategic attack, large or small, on the United States.

That the Soviet Union might have greater incentive to attack if we have warfighting options is based on the proposition that preemptive attack is advantageous compared to being the victim of a counterforce strike. Preemptive attack is an attack in the belief that you are about to be attacked by your opponent. Critics of warfighting options charge that the qualities of a force with limited nuclear options—improved command and control, accurate weapons—may not be distinguishable from a counterforce capability, the capability to destroy the opponent's weapons before he can use them in retaliation. How is an opponent to know that only X ICBM have been set aside for limited nuclear options when X+? seem to have the accuracy and killing power to be counterforce weapons?

This problem of an opponent seeing what is not intended cannot be easily dismissed because our own views of Soviet intentions are also largely based on their military capabilities, not necessarily on Soviet declared policy. For example, we will not find a statement by a Soviet official of consequence declaring that they are building a first strike capability or a counterforce capability or even a war winning capability predicated on the assumption that they intend to attack the United States. The Soviets can assert, with the rules of strategic rhetoric on their side, that they are doing no more than protecting themselves, assuring their survival, perhaps, just in case war should occur.<sup>20</sup> In the language of international diplomacy, wars just occur, as with natural disasters—no one, apparently, starts them. Yet these same programs each side undertakes to assure its survival also lend themselves to inferences that they could be intended to threaten the survival of the inferrer. On his retirement in December of 1976, US Air Force Chief of Intelligence was reported in *The New York Times* as "convinced that the Soviet Union was preparing for offensive war against the United States."<sup>21</sup> If this belief is not shared by many other strategists—it may or may not be—then at least some others are convinced that "the Soviet Union is seeking superiority over the United States,"<sup>22</sup> in military strength and, most pertinently, in strategic forces.

The upshot of this kind of view is that if government officials in the United States come to believe that Soviet intentions are to achieve "superiority," then having limited nuclear warfighting options which are allegedly provocative of preemptive strikes may be one of our less worrisome problems. The big problem is how to avoid, manage, slow down both sides' momentum toward developing greater warfighting capabilities or even war winning strategies and forces.

I remember Herman Kahn asking a small group at one of his seminars how they estimated the probabilities of strategic nuclear attack (central war) depending on the ratio of strength between the two potential belligerents. When one side had only half as much as the other, the expected likelihood of war differed hardly at all from when both sides were about equal. What Kahn demonstrated to us, I believe, is that it is difficult for most of us to imagine strategic nuclear war as a sensible choice for anyone, even when he is "superior," though not necessarily invulnerable to retaliation.

Those of us in Kahn's little group did not, however, feel the pressures that would affect decisionmakers in intense crises; we were not concerned with the "stakes" to be preserved or lost were we unwilling to risk the use of nuclear force. Perhaps, also, none of us would have disagreed with Barbara Tuchman that "war is the unfolding of miscalculations."

## CONCLUSION

There are solutions to the warfighting debate, at least conceptually, and probably also in concrete terms of strategic nuclear capabilities. As Lynn Davis notes, "most writers have concluded that flexibility is desirable and that the issues of flexibility and counterforce should be clearly separated."<sup>23</sup> (For flexibility, read, "some warfighting capability," in terms of the present essay.) She later concludes:

If most of the options designed under the new doctrine involve very large numbers of modern weapons, then serious doubts should be raised as to whether the doctrine really enhances deterrence and limits the risk of uncontrolled escalation.<sup>24</sup>

Both sides in the debate have used the "Schlesinger doctrine" as the surrogate for their more profound concerns about the course of developments in strategic strengths, their effects on stability in crises, and their consequences for arms control and disarmament negotiations



and agreements. I believe that many of the proponents of warfighting options do not think that all we need are limited warfighting capabilities for flexibility and improved deterrence. They are more concerned, generally, that the Soviets are developing a war winning posture, and, specifically, with encouraging the development of counterforce and other US strategic forces to regain what they see as the lost psychological and functional advantages of strategic force in extended deterrence. I do not believe the opponents of the change in policy seriously worry about a president reaching too quickly for strategic weapons, or a premier too willing to strike preemptively because the United States has some warfighting capability. The opponents are more concerned that the new policy is, or can be, a prelude to an "unstable" war winning posture and strategy based, of course, on the disputed inference that the Soviets are developing such a capability.

Identifying these beliefs requires no special insight. They are positions taken by writers on strategic policy through the phases of the debate and, indeed, before Mr. Schlesinger's 1974 announcement. Not only the adjusted policy is at issue, but also the entire size and shape of the American strategic deterrent as compared to the Soviets'. Secretary Schlesinger made a distinction between the change in policy that gave us the measured options and the overall "sizing" of the strategic force.

In order to bring about alterations in our targeting strategies, we do not require to increase the numbers or the throw-weight of what we have in our strategic arsenal. The sizing of the strategic arsenal will depend upon SALT and will depend upon the position taken by the Soviets at SALT.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction is certainly clear enough for the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT): we intend to have the limited options capability regardless of Soviet decisions—they are not negotiable. The shape and size of the total strategic force depend on SALT.

But it may well be suspected by critics of the new policy that, perhaps in spite of Mr. Schlesinger's best intentions, the two features of policy—selective targeting and the sizing of the arsenal—are not separable. Are the limited, warfighting options the camel's nose under the tent, the falling of the first domino (to multiply metaphors)? Are they likely to be a step in a drive toward war winning forces on both sides? Does the articulated need for the limited options bear any relation to the avalanche of writings which take as their premise that the Soviets are bent on having what I have called a war winning posture?<sup>26</sup>



As some debaters might prefer to say, the Soviets are developing a war winning capability; we should develop a denial-of-war winning capability. Be that as it may, a war winning capability must be heavy on counterforce weapons. To win the nuclear war, the damage that can be inflicted by an opponent must be deterrable or tolerable. For this damage to be deterrable or tolerable, the opponent's counterforce capabilities must be reduced significantly—that is, before they are launched on their intercontinental mission. The opponent will have other means for strategic retaliation, but they are not likely to be useful for other than strikes on cities, thereby placing his own cities in jeopardy to the war winner's unused strategic weapons.

What if both sides develop their strategic forces to have better and larger counterforce capabilities? Will they have gained more than greater incentive to be the first to strike? Will the mutual fear of surprise attack dominate the politics of that future and make us yearn for the nostalgic innocence of debating the meaning of parity? More than this, will it restore the psychological advantage for extended deterrence, the passing of which is lamented by advocates of counterforce?

This is not to say that the alarms sounded by warfighters and counterforce proponents about Soviet intentions are to be dismissed because we might not agree with their tone. Although I have concentrated on the debate as a problem for American policymakers, it is not as though we need only to adopt exemplary programs of restraint in the hope that the Soviets will follow suit. On this Mr. Schlesinger is correct in stipulating that what we do will depend on SALT and what the Soviets do at SALT. Debasement of the action-reaction explanation of arms competition does not seem to extend to our own need to react to Soviet actions.

The little debate about warfighting options is a phony war but useful for all that because it contains most of the elements of the big debate.<sup>27</sup> It will be part of that larger debate when the new American administration settles into its national security policies confronted with the dilemma of arms—those promises of peace, those premises for war.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Documentation: Flexible Strategic Options and Deterrence, Excerpts from the Press Conference of US Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, January 10, 1974," *Survival*, March/April 1974, pp. 86-90.

2. US Department of Defense, *Posture Statement: Report of the Secretary of Defense, James R. Schlesinger, to the Congress on the FY 1975 Defense Budget and FY 1975-1979 Defense Program*, March 4, 1974, p. 5.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7. For one example, see Colin S. Gray, Letter to Editor, *The New York Times*, January 16, 1977, p. 18E.

8. One example, using the metaphors of a photograph and a moving film, is Uri Ra'anani, *The Changing American-Soviet Strategic Balance: Some Political Implications*, especially pp. 5-6. Committee print of the US Congress, Senate, Committee on Government Operations, 92nd Congress, 2d Session. Washington: US Government Printing Office, March 10, 1972.

9. Thomas Milburn, *Design for the Study of Deterrent Processes*, China Lake, California: US Naval Ordnance Test Station, April 1964, p. 2.

10. Urs Schwarz and Laszlo Hadik, *Strategic Terminology*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966, p. 58.

11. This is a disputed point among Western strategists. Some argue that the Soviets would recognize levels of war. At least some believe the Soviets would want to confine a war that started in Central Europe to that area, and leave Russia unscathed.

12. General purpose forces are armies, naval forces, and tactical air forces that could be used to conquer or defend disputed territory in a direct clash with the opponent's general purpose forces, as opposed to long-range missiles and aircraft.

13. Richard M. Nixon, *US Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace*, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1973, p. 122.

14. Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Detente," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1976, p. 223. Nitze's comment was not in the context of NATO defense problems, although I believe it is appropriate in that context.

15. James R. Schlesinger, *The Theater Nuclear Force Posture in Europe: A Report to the United States Congress in Compliance with Public Law 93-365*, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1975, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*

17. John D. Steinbruner, "Beyond Rational Deterrence: The Struggle for New Conceptions," *World Politics*, January 1976, p. 244. Steinbruner is referring to "limited counterforce" attacks, but the adjusted policy does not confine potential targets to military forces and facilities.

18. James R. Schlesinger, "The Evolution of American Policy Towards the Soviet Union," *International Security*, Summer 1976, pp. 42-43.

19. In testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings: Briefing on Counterforce Attacks, September 11, 1974*, 93d Congress,

2d Session, Washington: US Government Printing Office, January 1975, pp. 37-38.

20. For example, "A Soviet General Assails Charges in West on Civil Defense Steps," *The New York Times*, January 20, 1977, p. 3, and David K. Shipler, "Soviet Says Buildup In Arms Isn't Aimed at Surpassing U.S.," *The New York Times*, February 6, 1977, pp. 2, 6.

21. David Binder, "New CIA Estimate Finds Soviet Seeks Superiority in Arms," *The New York Times*, December 26, 1976, p. 14.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

23. Lynn E. Davis, "Limited Nuclear Options: Deterrence and the New American Doctrine," *Adelphi Paper No. 121*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Winter 1975/76, p. 10.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

25. *Survival*, p. 86.

26. See especially Paul Nitze's article in *Foreign Affairs*, cited above, and Nitze's, "The Strategic Balance: Between Hope and Skepticism," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1974-75, pp. 136-156, and "Deterring Our Deterrent," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1976-77, pp. 195-210.

27. I have reported the debate as if each side consists of a coherent group of ideas, a pretense that is not borne out in the literature I have consulted. Therefore, with the few exceptions already made, I have not connected specific authors with either side of the debate. Without identifying which side is which, the sources most influential in helping me to organize the competing arguments were, in addition to those already cited: David Aaron, "A New Concept," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1974-75, pp. 157-165; Bernard S. Albert, "Constructive Counterpower," *Orbis*, Summer 1976, pp. 343-366; Les Aspin, "How to Look at the Soviet-American Balance," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1976, pp. 96-106; Paul Doty, Albert Carnesdale, and Michael Nacht, "The Race to Control Nuclear Arms," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1976, pp. 119-132; Thomas J. Downey, "How to Avoid Monad—and Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1976, pp. 172-201; G. B. Kistiakowsky, "Hazards of Soviet Scare Stories," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 17, 1977, p. 23; Laurence Martin, "Changes in American Strategic Doctrine—An Initial Interpretation," *Survival*, July/August 1974, pp. 158-164; Herbert Scoville, Jr., "Flexible Madness?," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1974, pp. 164-177; John D. Steinbruner and Thomas M. Garwin, "Strategic Vulnerability: The Balance Between Prudence and Paranoia," *International Security*, Summer 1976, pp. 138-181; Adam Ulam, "Detente Under Soviet Eyes," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1976, pp. 145-159; Paul C. Warnke, "Apes on a Treadmill," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1975, pp. 12-29; Albert Wohlstetter, "Optimal Ways to Confuse Ourselves," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1975, pp. 170-198.



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The positions of debaters, although presented within the scope of the warfighting debate, are more understandable as reflecting their views on the larger issues of total deterrence policy. The small debate and the "Schlesinger doctrine" that started it are really surrogates of the concerns of strategists about the possible future of US-USSR strategic arms competition. If this is true, then warfighting capabilities are probably much less influential for deterrence and for strategic stability than they are influential as a harbinger of possible future arms competition.

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